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ABSTRACT

The process of writing a term paper requires certain necessary steps. This guide offers specific and practical directions for writing a comprehensive term paper on any subject and addresses the three main concerns: the procuring of information; format and organization of the paper; and reading and proofreading the paper. Step-by-step examples are provided in the guide. Reviewed are the procedure of going to the library, the Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) system and the Public Access Catalog (PAC) to procure materials; the writing of the paper; proofreading for errors, including grammar, syntax, sentence structure, run on sentences and other problems; and the rewriting of the paper. (CR)

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A Helpful Handout on " How to Write a Term Paper "

ED 392 068

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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How to Write a Term Paper
Student's Name
Eastern New Mexico University
Portales, New Mexico

{ The title should reflect the content of your paper }
[It may be helpful to re-read your paper before submitting it, or have another student read it prior to submission]

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Abstract

An abstract should be approximately 5 or 6 sentences and it should give, in general terms, what the paper is all about. It should be brief, concise, succinct, focused and to the point. The idea behind an abstract is so that someone who might be interested in reading your paper knows ahead of time what it is all about. Here is an example of an abstract to give you a "feel" for writing one :

This paper will examine the process of writing a term paper. It will discuss the necessary steps required to write a comprehensive term paper on any subject. This paper will review the procedure of going to the library to procure materials, the writing of the paper itself, proof reading the paper for errors and the re-writing of the paper. The last stage of proof-reading for grammar, syntax, sentence structure, run on sentences and other problems will also be reviewed. It is hope that this paper will enhance one's writing skills and provide remediation for other's whose writing skills have deteriorated over time.

Remember to indent and to double space where appropriate!

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After the abstract, the first page should give the reader a brief introduction regarding the paper. It is important to get the reader interested and tell him or her a bit about what they are about to read. It should provide an "advance organizer" of sorts. In other words that first paragraph should tell the reader what they will read about and try to interest them in the topic. Back in English 101 or English 102, instructors would try to get you to define "terms" such as euthanasia (if that was what your paper was about !) As you progress through college, this tactic or stragegy is less needed, as you are obviously writing to a different audience (most college juniors or seniors know what euthanasia is). Let me here provide a sample introductory paragraph.

This paper will review the basic essentials of term paper writing. Writing is a necessary skill for college students, and for people in general. This paper will address three main concerns. First, procuring information from the library will be discussed. We will discuss the Dewey Decimal System and doing a computer search. We will then discuss refining the topic. Secondly, we will discuss the format of the paper and the organization of the paper. Lastly, we will discuss reading, and proof reading the paper. It is hope that this paper will generate some thinking about the need for good writing skills and the importance of proof reading one's paper.

(Here, the introductory paragraph was similar to the abstract- but was a bit more in depth. Now, your introductory paragraph should follow some sort of outline and the paper should reflect the organization of both the abstract and the introductory paragraph).

(On each page, there should be a page number and the running head. The idea behind a running head is to help organize your paper and if your paper clip falls off, you will be able to paginate your paper. Obviously, it may be better to staple your paper. Most instructors don't need those plastic liners for papers, and in general, you are wasting precious time running to the bookstore for these binders and making the bookstore rich. Note my words however! I used the words "most" and "in general". I am making a generalization. You may want to check with your instructor to see if he or she wants (or needs) those binders or folders!

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As you progress through the paper, pay particular attention to paragraphs. Make sure that the paragraph flows smoothly and, in general, discusses one main topic. One sentence paragraphs are usually inappropriate. Note here that I say, or use the word " inappropriate ". This does not mean that a one sentence paragraph is totally wrong, or that you should fail the course, but that it should be avoided, if at all possible.

In general, a paragraph should include about 5-6 sentences. In some cases, your paragraph will be longer, in other cases, shorter. Depending upon the type of paper you are writing, you may opt for several short paragraphs or two or three longer one. Again, in general, numbers should be written out in paragraphs. I have used the numbers 5-6, above for the purpose of clarity and succinctness. I might lose a few points on a term paper for doing this. It might be overlooked if I had written an exceptionally interesting, provacative term paper.

Headings are sometimes important, particularly if you are changing topics or moving from one topic to the next. For example, if you were discussing the process of writing before the computer, and then wanted to discuss the current status of writing with the computer, you might want to use a heading or a specific transitional sentence. Here, I am going to try to discuss a different topic, so I may want to fluidly change from one topic to another. The topic is that of " dangling participles ".

Some instuctors find "dangling participles" difficult to cope with. Ending a sentence with a participle , such as " with " is generally thought to be improper. This writer made a small mistake in the first sentence in this paragraph. I ended a sentence with the word "with". Correctly used, the word should take a noun. For example, I went to the store with my brother. The word "with" here is correctly used, since a noun follows it.

Sometimes, it is difficult to procure books and information on the topic that you are writing on. Some librarians can help you. You also may want to do a "computer search" which may cost some money. The ERIC system (Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse) is a system that uses "descriptors" to locate information. Descriptors can either be words, or key terms that the computer can use to locate published papers on the topic of interest. There are other means to locate papers, articles and books on very specific topics. If you are having a very hard time locating materials, it may be that you have chosen a very esoteric topic- such as giftedness in left handed females, or Williams Syndrome, a rare medical condition.

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At the end of the paper, there is generally a summary or conclusions section. (Note again that I use the word "generally" - certain formats, for example MLA or the ASA (American Sociological Association) may require or want different formats. You again need to check with your instructor.

The summary or conclusions sections should attempt to :

a) review what you told the reader

b) tie the entire paper together

c) indicate future needed research (if you feel there is any)

d) summarize or conclude what you have said or found out. (In most term papers, you are trying to investigate some area in depth, or prove a point- for example, you may want to take a stand for or against euthanasia and document what you have found in your reading or time in the library.

e) In some instances, you may want to indicate your opinion regarding the issue or the paper. You may want to use the phrase " this writer feels " or "this author thinks". Or, you may want to simply state " I believe ". Check with your instructor as to whether he or she wants first or third person used in your paper. This issue will be discussed later.

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References

Here, you want to give credit to the people that you have either paraphrased or quoted verbatim (word for word) in your paper. You may want to work from a model, or buy a textbook that will help you reference what you have cited. In general, it is best to use books, journal articles, and textbooks for sources of materials. You will find that most instructors abhor sources that are referred to as "pulp" or "tabloid" . If you were doing a serious term paper on a serious topic, you want to cite the experts in the field and those who know a bit about what they are talking about. Articles in " Better Homes and Garden's" and "McCalls" are probably, in my opinion, not worth citing in a college level term paper. By the same token, articles from "National Enquirer" are not appropriate for a college level term paper. In the same vein, articles from a local newspaper may not be appropriate for a senior level term paper.

If you have a relative that is a physician or some professional, you may ask them questions about your topic and they may be able to give you articles or references about your topic. However, to talk to your uncle who is a pediatrician about " hyperactivity " and then to write your entire term paper from your conversation with him is not appropriate. While he may be a physician, he may not be an expert, nor has he published anything in the field. On that note, it is probably wise, prudent, judicious, not to reference material for which there is no author. However, again, you may want to check with your instructor as to the quality of that material.

Citations should be relatively recent. In other words, research and papers published prior to 1960 should probably not be cited. It is now 1996 and advances in research and theory have changed over the years and to use a source published in the 1950's is probably not appropriate. Again, check with your instructor in this regard.

Earlier in this section, I used the phrase "in my opinion". In your term papers, you may want to find out from your instructor if he or she wants to hear your opinion or if your paper is purely a " fact finding " paper. Some instructors do care what you think and feel. Other instructors may not care what your opinion is regarding euthanasia, and prefer that you simply discuss the issue in a neutral, objective fashion. Discuss this issue with your instructor (not the issue of euthanasia but the issue of your opinion in the paper).

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Some Final Thoughts !

Some students who are returning to education after being in the military or in the work force for several years may need some additional help in writing. There are several developmental writing courses or remedial writing courses at many universities. In some student services centers, there are senior level students or graduate students who will help you by reviewing your paper.

In other instances, you may simply need to go back and take English 104 or 108 or audit these courses to improve your writing skills. Like violin playing, practice is continually needed. Some students may have simply had poor writing instructors in high school or college, and simply need more work!

In writing, one needs to revise and proof read their papers for the following :

1) Spelling or typographical errors
2) Run on sentences
3) Tense problems
4) Syntax
5) Dangling participles
6) Sentences with no verbs
7) Incorrect splitting of a word at the end of a sentence.
8) Commas, hypens, apostrephe's, exclamation marks and etc.

9) Problems with the words "there" or "their". In this case, if you use " SPELLCHECK " or some computer program, the computer will not recognize that you are using the word incorrectly. The same is true of the words " principal " and "principle". Your instructor (who perhaps was a principal in a high school) will not appreciate your referring to a scientific principle as a school principal. You cannot blame "spell check" for your errors- you (to, two, or too ?) must accept ultimate responsibility.

10) If you pay someone else to type your paper, make sure they are competent. If you pay $ 35.00 for your paper to be typed and you receive a D- on the paper, you are the one who gets the grade, not your typist.

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11) The quality of your paper is a major concern . You may have gone to the library, and done a fine job of researching your topic and still have received a grade that you do not like. It may be due to your procrastination (do not wait until the week before the paper is due to start preparing) or it may be due to overly simplistic sentences on your part. You may have " CLEP-ED " English 100 or 105 in your freshman year and that may have been a big mistake ! You may want to read the term papers of your fellow students to get a " feel " for their writing level. Compare and contrast your paper to theirs.

12) Be careful of colloquial writing. Don't say that "education has to get it's act together" or that someone needs to "chill out".

13) Use your library and librarian, but remember there are things that a librarian cannot, and should not do. The librarian is there to refer you to information, to help you locate information and to use the ERIC system and the PAC system (Public Access Catalog) if there is one. The librarian is not there to write your term paper for you or to check format or references. Some generous individuals may help you, but that is not part of their job. They may procure articles from inter-library loan. Some small libraries may not have everything students need or want. Thus, they may have to procure it from another library or university. Sometimes, articles can be faxed almost immediately. Other times, it may take 7-10 days to receive a requested paper or book or chapter from a book. Patience is necessary and needed.

14) Choosing a topic is often difficult for some students. It is preferable to choose a topic that you are interested in. If you are not interested in your topic, then you may not do a good job researching and writing the paper. Some students spend a certain amount of time familiarizing themselves with the library. This may be a wise investment of your time, and effort and energy.

14) Sometimes even a good proofreader will fail to notice specific mistakes and errors. One good idea is for you to read your paper aloud and "hear" how it sounds.

15) Obviously, it is important to type your paper and that margins are consistent with your format. However, remember that your thoughts and the quality of your writing are also important. One ultimate goal for many writers is to get published and to see their work in print. Even some college students can get published if their writing is of quality and importance.

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